

DESIGN

Vol. XXXII, No. 1

MAY, 1930

■ Making a good magazine a better one is our dominant aim, and at this Easter Season it is a pleasure to offer you DESIGN, larger, richer, more varied in contents—and with a new dress, whose style and color we are anxious to have everyone approve, along with the numerous other changes made on our pages. We feel that our old friends, as well as some of our newer readers and acquaintances, must take some pride with us in seeing the Magazine in its new form, constantly growing and serving an ever increasing number of art workers. It is a pleasure to add that during the past year the marked increase in circulation, covering all parts of the world, demonstrates emphatically the recognition we are receiving everywhere from master craftsmen, teachers and serious students of art appreciation. For this growth and enthusiastic support of what we are doing for decorative arts education, we express our extreme gratitude. This acceleration and expansion means giving more and finer things to our readers. Profusely illustrated pages with cuts, in line, half-tone and color, add much to the cost of production, and the favorable reaction show conclusively that these studies are valuable here, not only to the creative artist but to the person who reads DESIGN for the cultural background and understanding of the modern movements. Classes for mature art students and teachers in universities and colleges find it valuable as a text book. Art teachers in public and private schools report the advantage of using the large clearly reproduced illustrations, as they can be seen across the ordinary class room. For the coming year we shall look forward to continued co-operation in our new plans, not only among our steadfast friends but among new acquaintances we may make through our various issues.

■ Besides the new features introduced in this issue we hope to add many others from time to time. It is our plan to have a department devoted particularly to the introduction of new crafts and industrial arts stressing and explaining by drawings or photographs the various steps in the processes, modifications or any other point necessary to make matters clear to the reader. These will be arranged to assist teachers of art who desire new crafts to teach or industrial arts teachers who are feeling more and more the need of good design. Art structure, materials, processes, will be varied to meet the wide demand in this direction.

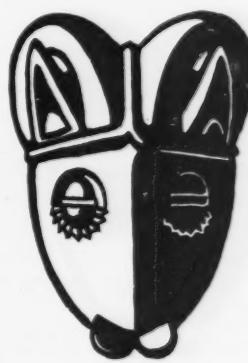
A department devoted to helps for teachers of art appreciation seems timely, for on all sides we see the movement on foot to reorganize the art work,

aiming for more appreciation for the many, and technique for the few. Any of our readers with ready suggestions are urged to send them in, for it stimulates the work of the publication to have its public vitally interested. For suggestions of this kind we shall be grateful.

■ This strangely powerful art of the African negro which developed and thrived centuries ago has of late held a unique place in the world of decorative arts. Its strong influence on modern painting, sculpture, architecture, and designs for textiles, ceramics and related fields cannot be overlooked. We feel particularly grateful for the choice material we have been able to use in this issue, planned as it was to emphasize not only the outstanding characteristics of extreme simplicity of line and form, but to point out as well its bearings on what craftsmen of this day may do in wood, clay, textiles, copper, silver, leather, etc. Designers who see beyond representation and subject matter can readily find much in rare decorative motifs and inter-relation of design and form in such expression. Pages 8, 13 and 15 should appeal strongly to artists who are ever alert to new rhythms and avoiding academic banalities. No designer should fail to keep atune with the best creative arts of other peoples and it is from the primitive races that we find the greatest vitality, directness and simplicity. Modern artists particularly find that the structure and economy of line in African Art has much to offer. In our efforts to serve that large group busily engaged in their mission of designing and creating beauty for the appreciation of the large mass of human kind there seems to be nothing more helpful than to present at intervals entire numbers of DESIGN filled with significant selections from the work of peoples where the decorative impulse ran high. Such issues have been found of immeasurable value to designers' libraries.

■ For the June issue we are arranging a variety of articles which will interest particularly teachers who are looking for material to be used directly in their class work. Among the articles to be offered our readers are: an interesting account of block print project used in the University of Washington class based on the old section of Seattle; an article on the art of leatherworking by Donn Jefferson, sheets with illustrations in full color and followed by a lesson in leather work for the craftsman; an art appreciation lesson; an article on Oriental Pottery; modern ring designs, and numerous reproductions of Eskimo drawings which will give much inspiration.

FELIX PAYANT.





PHOTOS BY CLEVELAND MUSEUM

THE DESIGN OF PRIMITIVE AFRICAN POTTERY AND TEXTILES ■ ■ ■

BY CHARLES F. RAMUS

A group of Negro pottery, most of which is modern, such as the jugs and small vases. The large jug in the center shows more freedom in the handling of material and design than do the more common examples of black earthenware. The small head cup to the left shows how these craftsmen handled some of their designs in wood

■ When we look back and contemplate the significant events which have transpired in the history of art since the birth of this century, we find not only outstanding developments, such as those which have taken place in the fields of painting and sculpture, but also that the design element in all of the art mediums has been brought into a sharper focus. This is partly due to the fact that the artists of today, who are striving to follow in the footsteps of the old masters, the founders as it were of the great tradition, have carried on to the best of their abilities the re-discoveries made by the outstanding artists and craftsmen of the 19th century. On the other hand it may be said that the bringing to light of the achievements of primitive has also had its share in renewing the form and design elements of art.

For a long time, the civilized world as we know it,

imagined that the environs of art encompassed only Egyptian, Greek, Romanesque, Renaissance and immediately Post-Renaissance cultures. However, our modern craftsmen, not caring to restate in the same way the forms and patterns, which had been bequeathed by the artists of these older epochs, found in the creations of primitive peoples a vitality and a beauty not only novel and significant, but also of the kind for which they had been searching.

It has only been within the past fifteen years or so that Negro art has come to mean anything to us. Up to this time Negro sculpture, arts and crafts were only known to intrepid explorers, ethnologists, and missionaries; and to them the "hideous little idols" which the natives worshipped the grass and bark cloth covered with "barbaric" designs, the crudely shaped pottery was nothing more or less than an uncultured people's striving for expression, and had nothing whatever to do with the "sacred" achievements of art. Even to many of the artists the seemingly mis-shapen and entirely out of proportion figures, the simple designs of lines and triangular shaped motifs were "beyond the pale"; were looked upon in a condescending way as clumsy attempts to reproduce the human form and as childish interpretations of fine designs; and were not to be classed with the "nobler" attainments of "civilized" art.

However, somewhere around 1907 the more progressive artists, then called fauves, idiots, madmen and various other colorful appellations, made the acquaintanceship of Negro art. They began to earnestly study the fetishes, to copy and adapt the simple forms and strong designs of the different Negro motifs to the more modern subjects on which



they were then working. Through the efforts of these artists, the art of today has been immeasurably enriched; and if primitive art had assumed a place of seemingly undue importance, because of the present-day fad which it is enjoying, it will be relegated to its rightful place in later years, because regardless of what may be said against it, there can be no denying its aesthetic importance.

Much has been said concerning the art of the Negro. In fact we still read at odd times a few amusing and incoherent articles on the "terrible" creations of the savages. It is a curious instance, regarding Negro art, that most of the writers have never approached it from an art instead of an archaeological point of view. They never stop to think that the Negro's work, for the most part, is a successful attempt to make something that is of a decidedly different vein than the products of the white civilization which are held up as the pinnacle of achievement. They never stop to ask themselves if the Negro artists desired to represent form in any other way than that which they did, or if they wanted to make patterns with curved motifs when their eyes received more pleasure from squares, straight lines and triangles.

The element of form is one of the most important and pronounced characteristics of all African art. The Negro artist, even in some of his more recent creations in which commercialism has all but killed the art element, has much to tell us as to his experiences and emotions concerning form. Seldom does he give the feeling of the surface of forms alone; he invariably includes or hints at the structure underneath, as seen in the head cups, head rests, maternity fetishes, ceremonial cups and jugs in Figures 1 and 2. In all of these various objects the form is so simple that it borders upon the abstract. These African artists thought of and conceived form in three dimensions; they felt form as something round and solid. They must have carved their fetishes in the same way that they molded their pots and wove their raffia fibre cloths, for even in many of the designs like Figure 4 you have a feeling of form, or of something solid.

In contrast to some of the best pottery of Greece or of

Fig. 1, Above--A series of five fetishes and carved ceremonial mugs which show the Negro's feeling for simple forms and decoration suitably placed

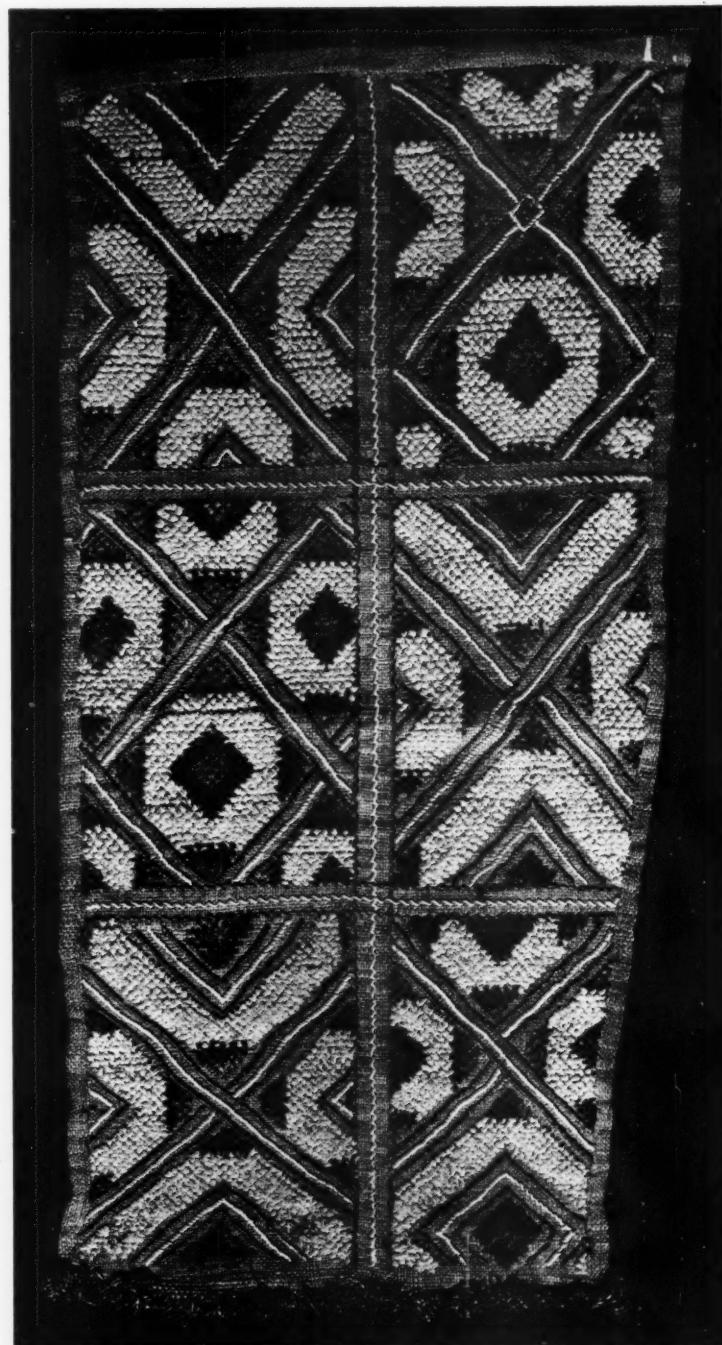
the 19th century, the Negro pots and jugs are not as refined in shape and texture, and yet the ruggedness of them has a certain beauty, not only in contour but in the few repeat designs which have been incised or molded on the surfaces. Take those in Figure 3, all of these have been made within the past few years but even though there may be some suggestion of degeneration in them, they are strong and simply done. The black ware of Ruanda and Misindi, as pictured, has a surface which feels like graphite and on this surface the potter has scratched bands and triangular shapes with a blunt instrument. He had filled these spaces with a cross-hatching which varies from fine lines to those of a coarser thickness and which modifies to some extent an otherwise monotonous smooth quality.

The larger brown Mangbettu jug with a head motif presents another of his designs. In this the semi-curved lines are more in harmony with the odd shape of the vessel than straight lines would be. The smaller wooden cup from the Congo in Figure 3 is similar to some of the motifs used in Figures 1 and 2. In these latter cups you are able to get, in a measure, the degree of skill which these craftsmen had. In these they have varied the direction and the size of the lines in order of variety; and in these also you feel that the designs are more pleasing.

To say that the Negro artists were not skillful, after seeing some of the complicated interlacing motifs on the headcups, is as much as refuting some of the archaic sculptures of early Greece and those of the middle ages which happily have little of the surface or photographic qualities which characterize the work of some of our more academically minded artists. The skill which they had, does not of course coincide with our meaning of the word; but nevertheless they did achieve some remarkable results,

Fig 4, Below--Negro Pile Cloth made by the Kasai Tribe, Congo, Africa. The rugged strength in the bold shapes of this primitive design is to be singled out as a characteristic of all negro art

Fig 5, Right--Example of Negro Pile Cloth, Kasai Tribe, Congo, interesting in its balance of light and dark.



when you consider that they had little to work with outside of native ability.

Their designs are old. No one knows exactly where they came from or the time when the Negroes first began to decorate their gods, pottery or themselves. Most all of their finer motifs are symbolic and had a connection with their religious ceremonies.

All of the Negro designs have a great freedom, and especially is this true of their decorated red bark-cloth and their pieces of grass pile cloth. In this last named variety the raised designs are made by pulling fine grass through the weave and cutting off the tops. The backgrounds are generally of one solid color such as a whitish yellow or a red tinged with violet which varies from a light tone to a semi deep hue. In this branch of art the Negro does not, as generally thought, go in for bright and garish colors.



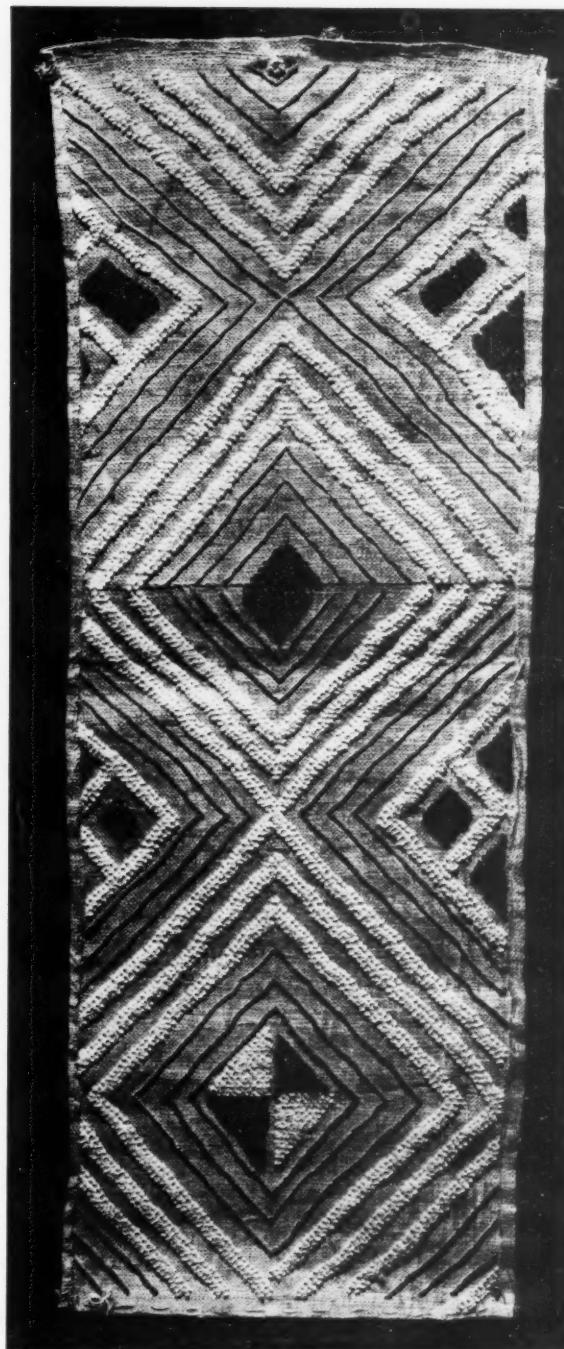
On the contrary his combinations are reserved, simple and harmonious.

In Figure 4 the cloth is almost completely covered with the pile. The design is strong, simple in motif and color, and is one of the most interesting both in vitality and craftsmanship. The lighter bands and triangles are of a straw color. The thin narrow lines are also of this color; but these are different in texture, having been embroidered on the surface. The middle tone, i. e., between the light and the dark, is of a faded red, just a little darker in value than the cloth itself. The dark triangles, squares and running border motifs are black.

In Figure 5 the shapes are smaller than those in Figure 4. The cloth itself is a light grey red. The light areas are of a straw yellow, the middle tones the same faded red and the other spots black. All of the pieces of pile cloth have virtually the same color scheme. Where the Negro

Fig. 6, Left--This example of Negro Pile Cloth is all one piece and yet the weaver has made two distinct designs each of which are interesting patterns

Fig. 7, Below--Negro Pile Cloth showing the Negros method of repeating certain forms without becoming monotonous. Kasai Tribe, Congo



gets his variety is in his varying the tones of these colors—sometimes making them lighter, darker, brighter or duller in hue. In looking at Figures 4, 5, 6 and 7 you will detect a similarity in the design motifs, and yet curiously enough each piece is a distinct work in itself.

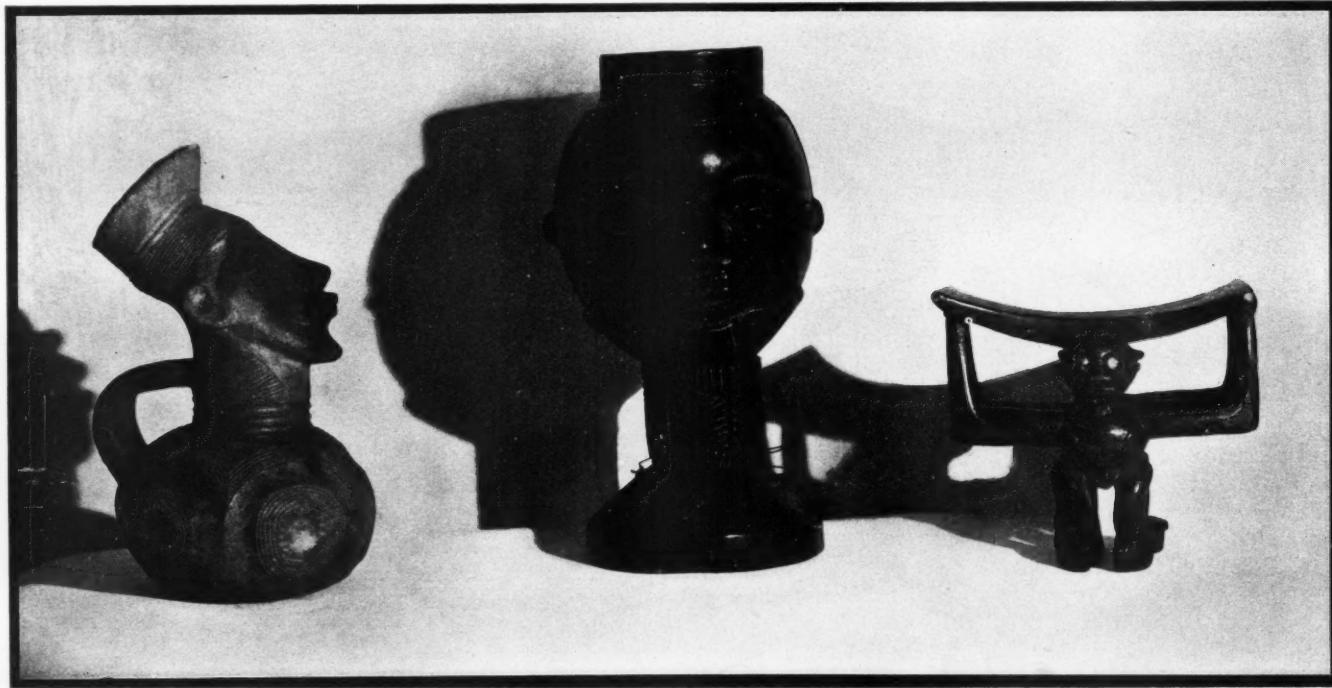
The Negro was limited in outlook, but with his few simple motifs he made a variety which few other peoples have done. Take Figure 6, for instance. Upon close inspection you will find that the design is not the same throughout. The long light strips in one part are broken into shorter lengths in the second part. Small light squares outlined with a thick black line have made their appearance and the whole character has been further changed by the introduction of the three black line motifs which gives a more subtle appearance. Here is a fine example of what can be done in varying a design. In one part you have a strong, robust and simple motif. In the second part you have the same design made more complicated by the breaking up of certain forms and the introduction of a greater number of smaller shapes which temper the once vigorous design, making it more delicate if that word can be used in connection with Negro art.

Contrast Figure 7 with Figure 4. In this the red cloth is a light blue-violet in parts and the raised design does not completely cover the surface. This work, though it may be more pleasing, does not have the strength of Figure 4. The wide strips are now somewhat thinner and are divided into three parts. The small black squares and triangles though smaller add a sparkle to the surface and the introduction of the black lines which form squares give the design added interest.

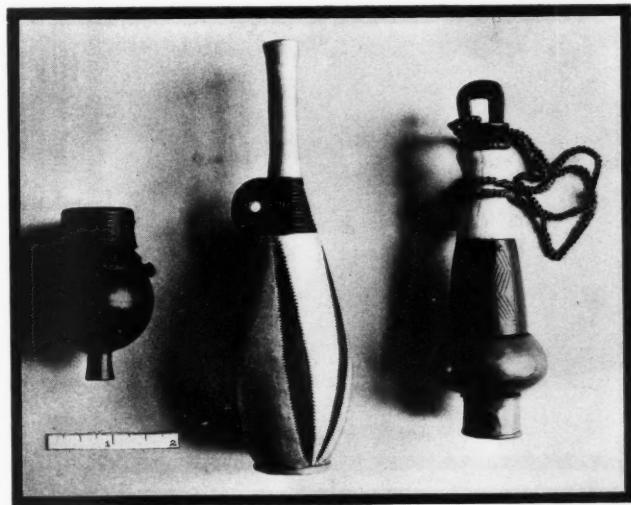
The Negro's designs are never quite as complicated as those which came out of the weaver's and dyer's shops in Italy during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. As crude as some of them may be, they are most expressive. When the white man came to Africa, bringing his pernicious and not to be praised influences the Negro artists, who were susceptible to new things became more realistic, losing the heritage left them by their ancestors. In their earlier

work, when they were not interested and knew nothing of commercialism, we can see in their carved cups, pottery, fetishes and textiles a feeling of life. Their designs were not realistic but they had a certain "disconcerting vitality" in the spontaneous forms and lines. The art of Africa shows that the Negro artists not only had a great imagination, and a profound completeness of vision but also a remarkably exquisite taste and feeling for the materials which they used. This is most evident in their masks, carved cups, statues and weaving, for these objects speak for themselves, even though their symbolism is unknown. They are the mute evidences of the art of a jungle people.

Fig. 2, Below—On the left is a pottery vessel. In the center and on the right are a ceremonial head cup and a carved head rest, double figure motif. All three of these show the Negro's flare for simple shapes and also his method of distributing design motifs at certain intervals where they supplement the simple and solid forms



MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY



Top, Idol and Calabash from Nigeria,
Pottery Jug covered with leather,
from Sierra Leona.

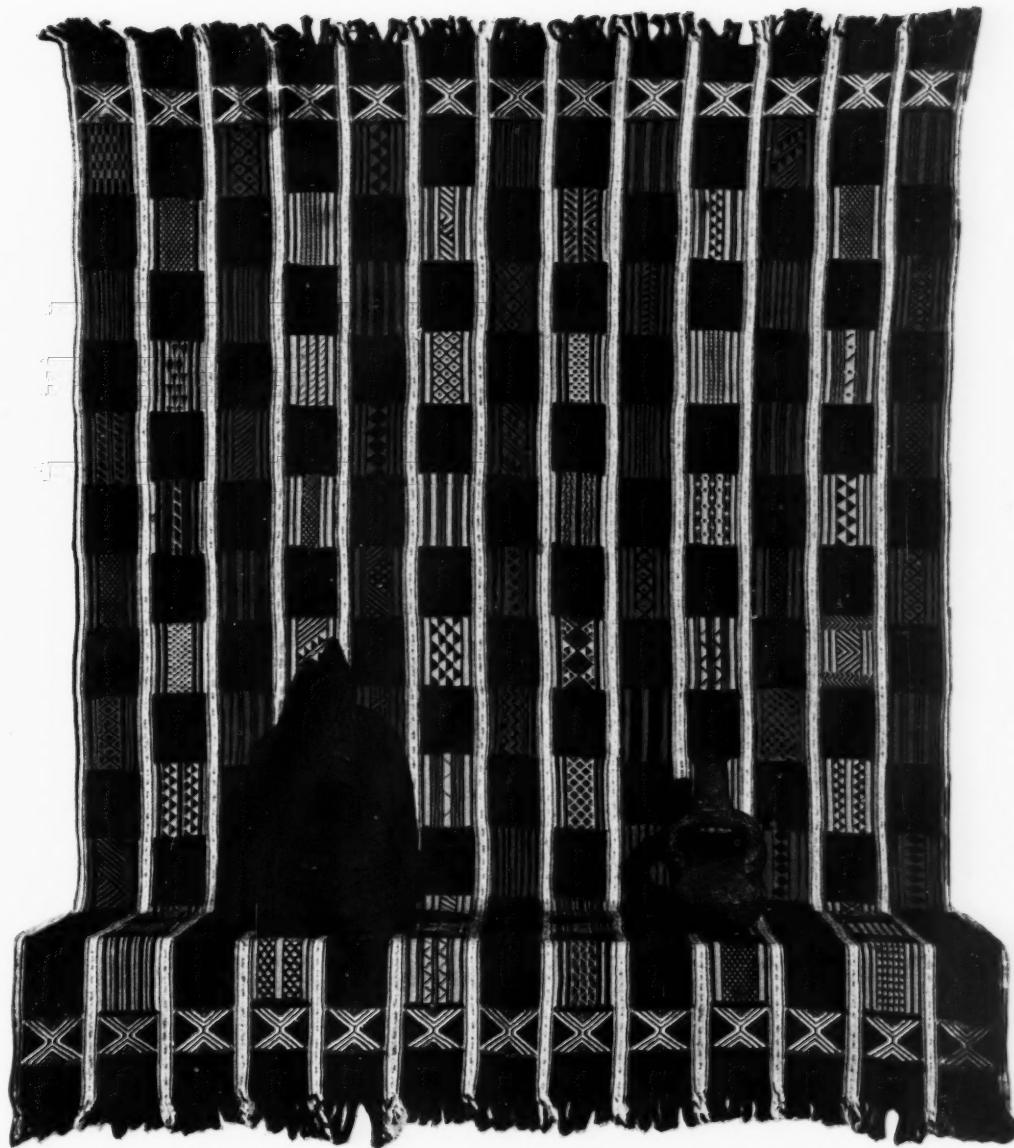
Lower, Calabash and top, Nigerian
idol. Left, Snuff boxes or bottles from
East Africa.

PRIMITIVE
AFRICAN
ANIMAL FORMS



R. HUDSON

RESEARCH AND DRAWINGS
BY RALPH M. HUDSON

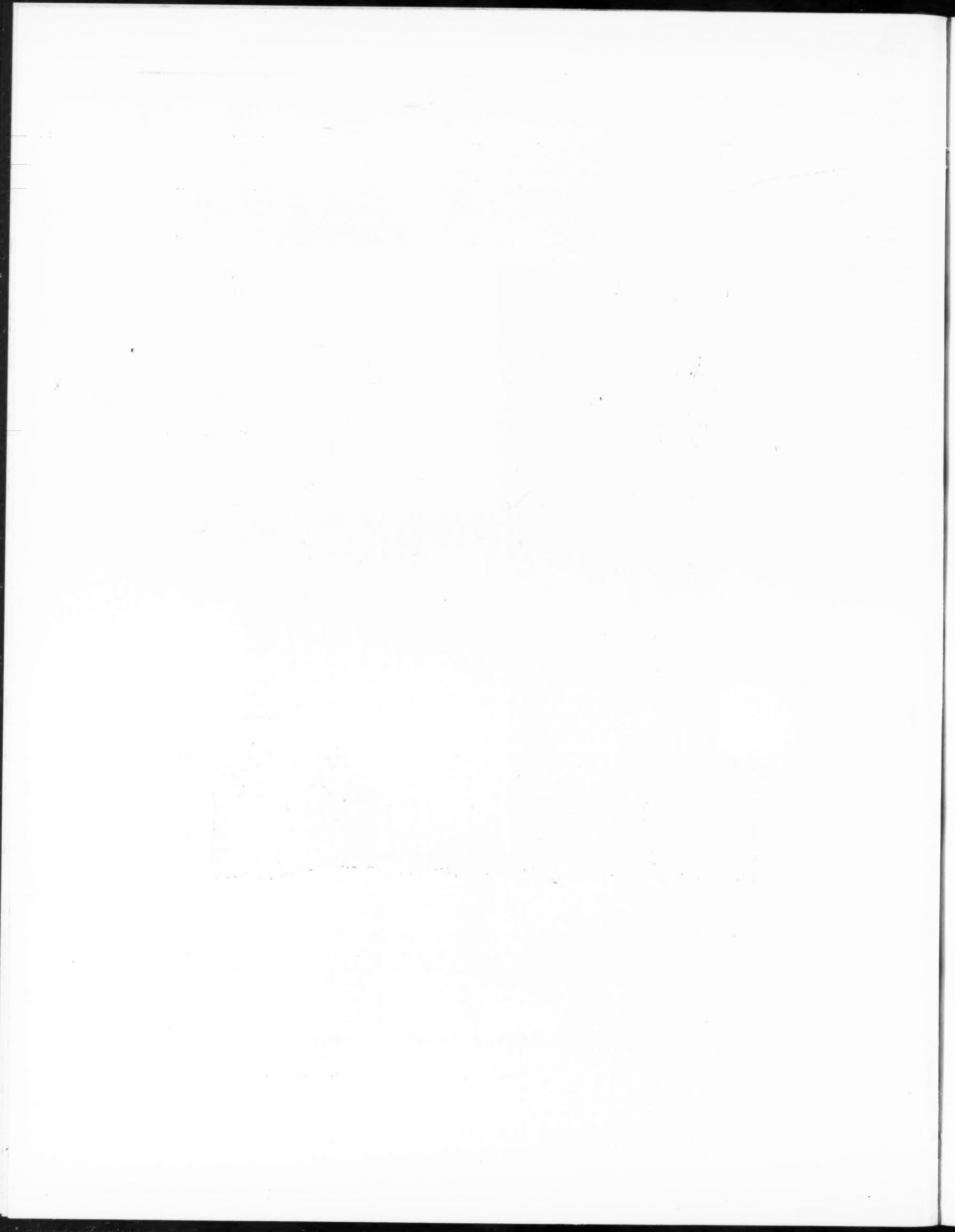


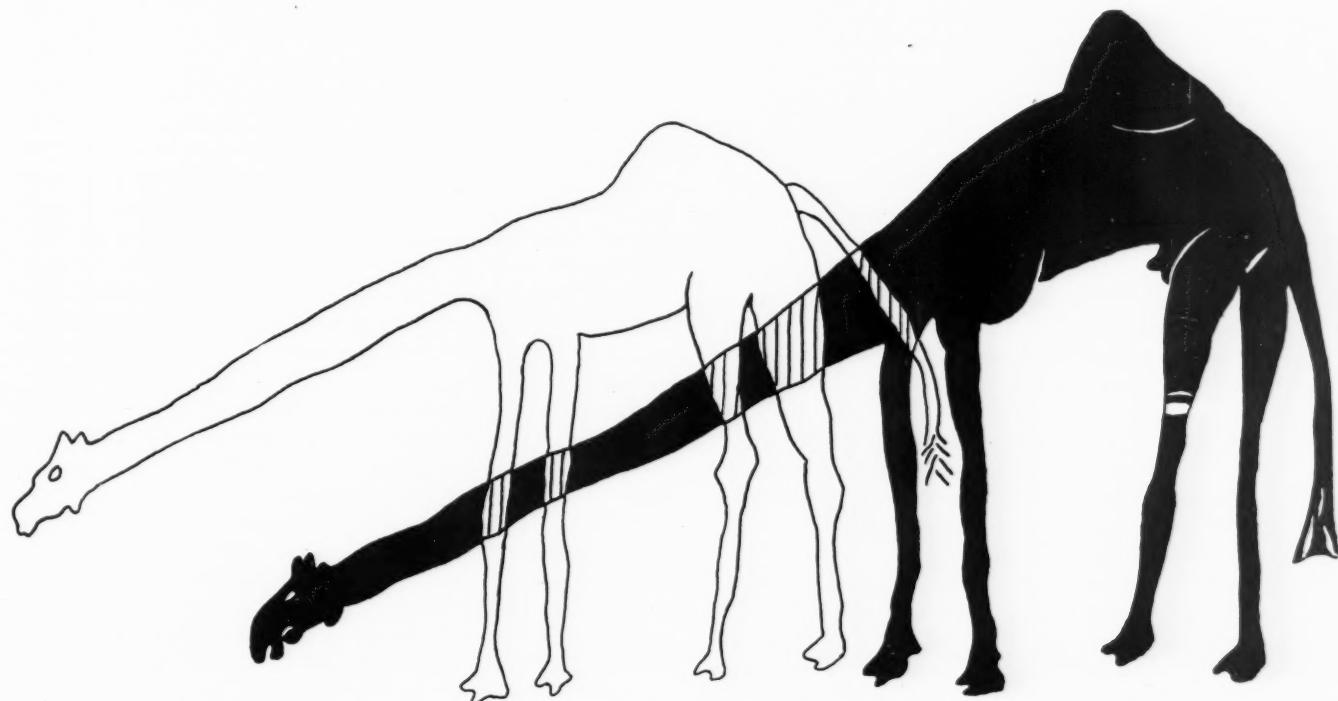
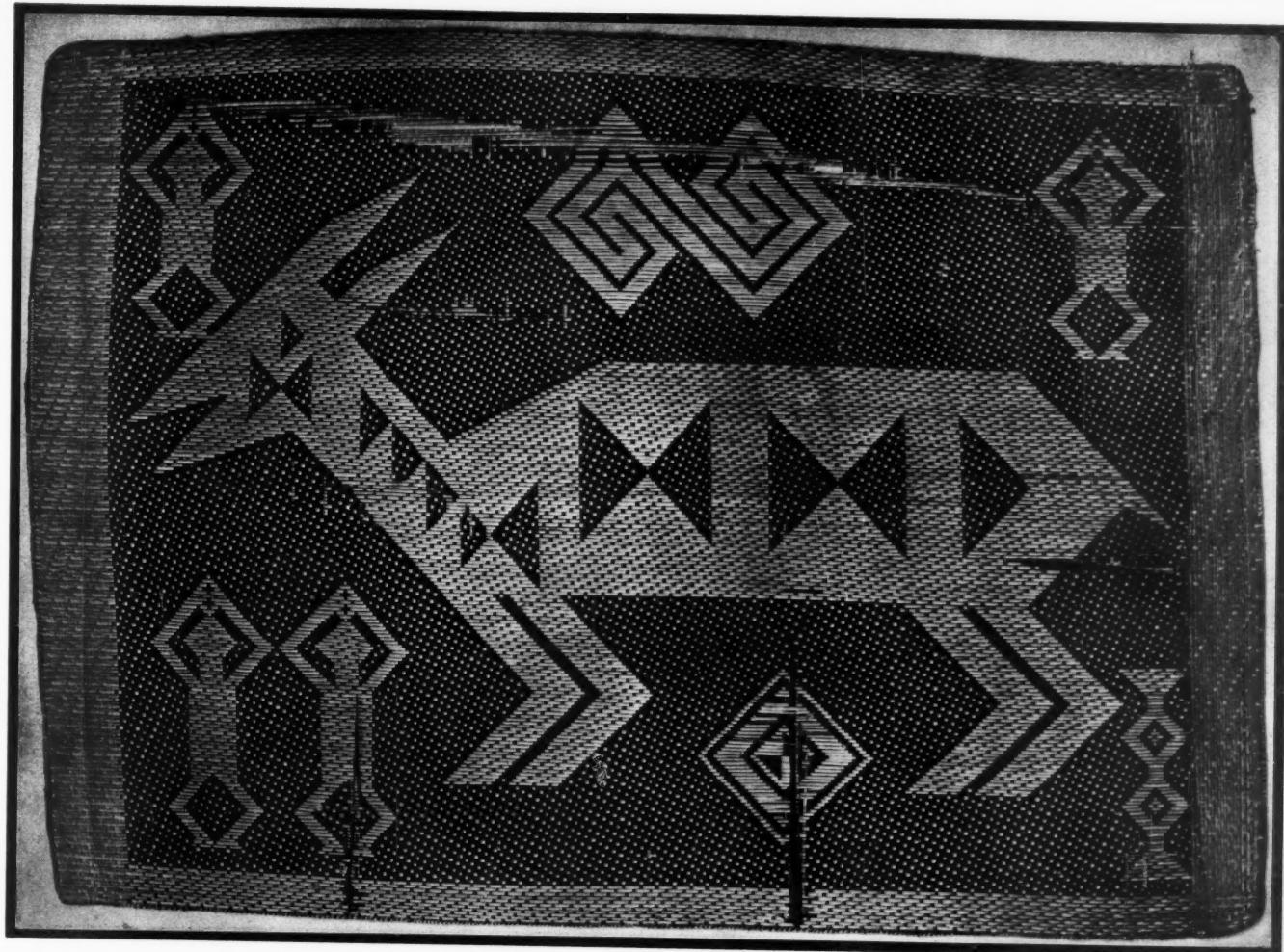
COURTESY NEWARK MUSEUM

MODERN COTTON SKIRT FROM THE IVORY COAST.
WOODEN MASK FROM DAHOMEY. POTTERY WINE BOTTLE
FROM THE MANGBETU TRIBE, UPPER BELGIAN CONGO

M A Y, 1930
Supplement to
D E S I G N

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KERAMIC STUDIO PUB. CO.
SYRACUSE, NEW YORK





ABOVE, WOVEN GRASS MAT

BELOW, BUSHMAN DECORATIVE DRAWING



THE ABORIGINAL ART GALLERIES OF AFRICA

BY FLORENCE F. STROYNE

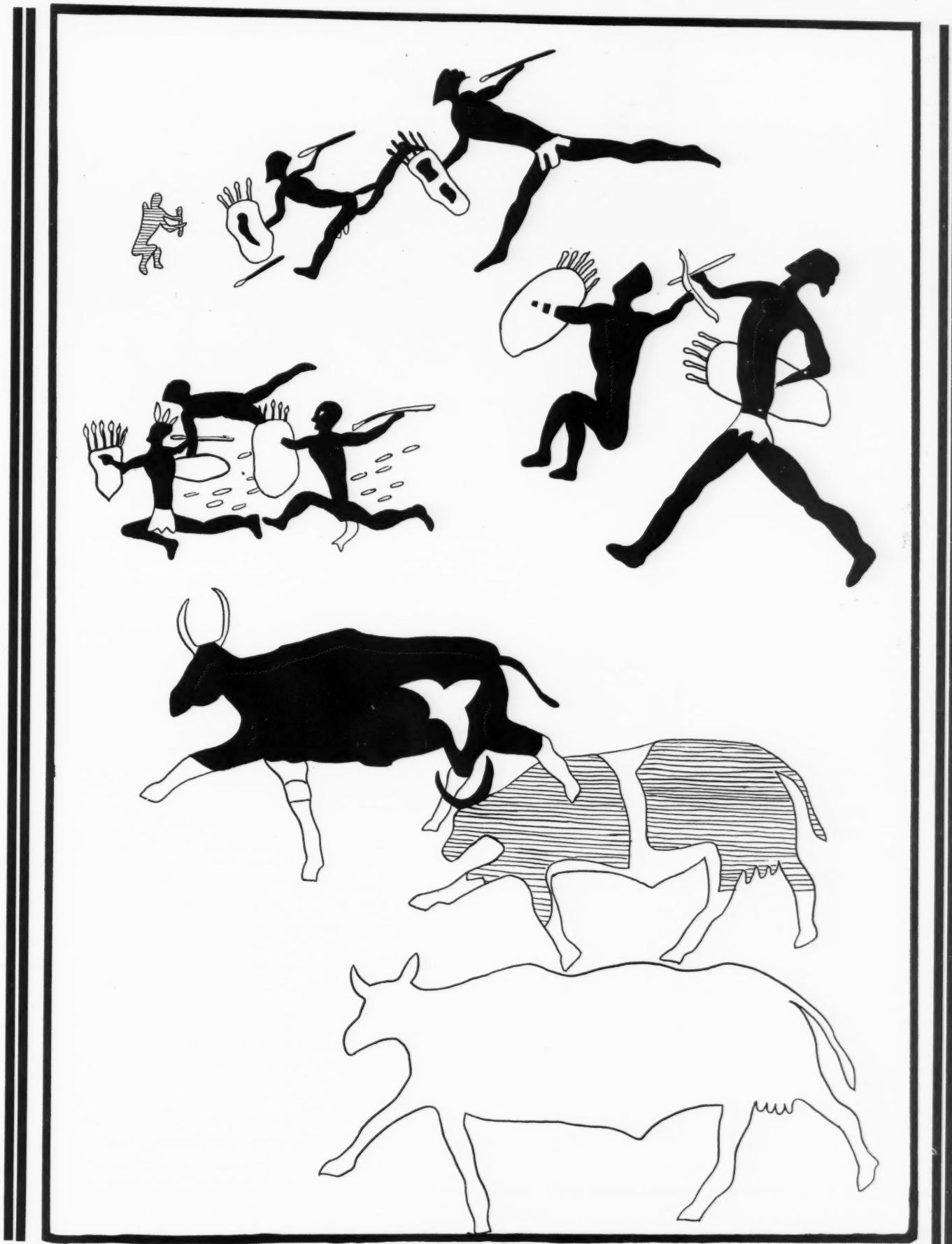
■ The Bushmen or Bosjesmen, a dwarf race, were undoubtedly the aborigines of Africa, and their descendants are met with today among the dwellers in the dense forests of Central Africa. They are regarded as the lowest in the scale of advancement of any of the African tribes, if not of all the primitive people in the world. They lived in rocky caves or in bush nest-like structures and roamed over the hills and through the forests in small bands searching wild animals for food with their bows and poisoned arrows. They secured protection from the deadly snake poison used on their arrows by cutting away the poisoned part as soon as the kill was made. Even though the Bushmen have been described as the most degraded of the whole human family, nevertheless, they must be credited with producing some of the most remarkable of all primitive sketches known to us. I allude here to the numerous Bushmen paintings, rock etchings, and sketches, which have been found in their caves and inscribed on rocks near their water springs. These drawings almost invariably represent figures of men and animals; depicting such animals as the monkey, elephant, cows, giraffes, rhinoceros, antelope, lion, and also the ostrich; the figures of the men being the most crudely drawn of all. Some of their subjects are supposed to represent religious ideas, while others illustrate incidents of the chase and of Bushmen mythology, and all must be regarded as portraying a distinct and definite purpose.

The Bushmen's engravings or etchings are executed by a slight chipping over the surface of the rock producing a dotted appearance. Some examples of their etchings are real works of art, and portrays a truly astonishing degree of skill. The paintings were executed with a feather dipped in grease, in which had been mixed colored clays and ochres. Their paintings and etchings are seldom seen together. The

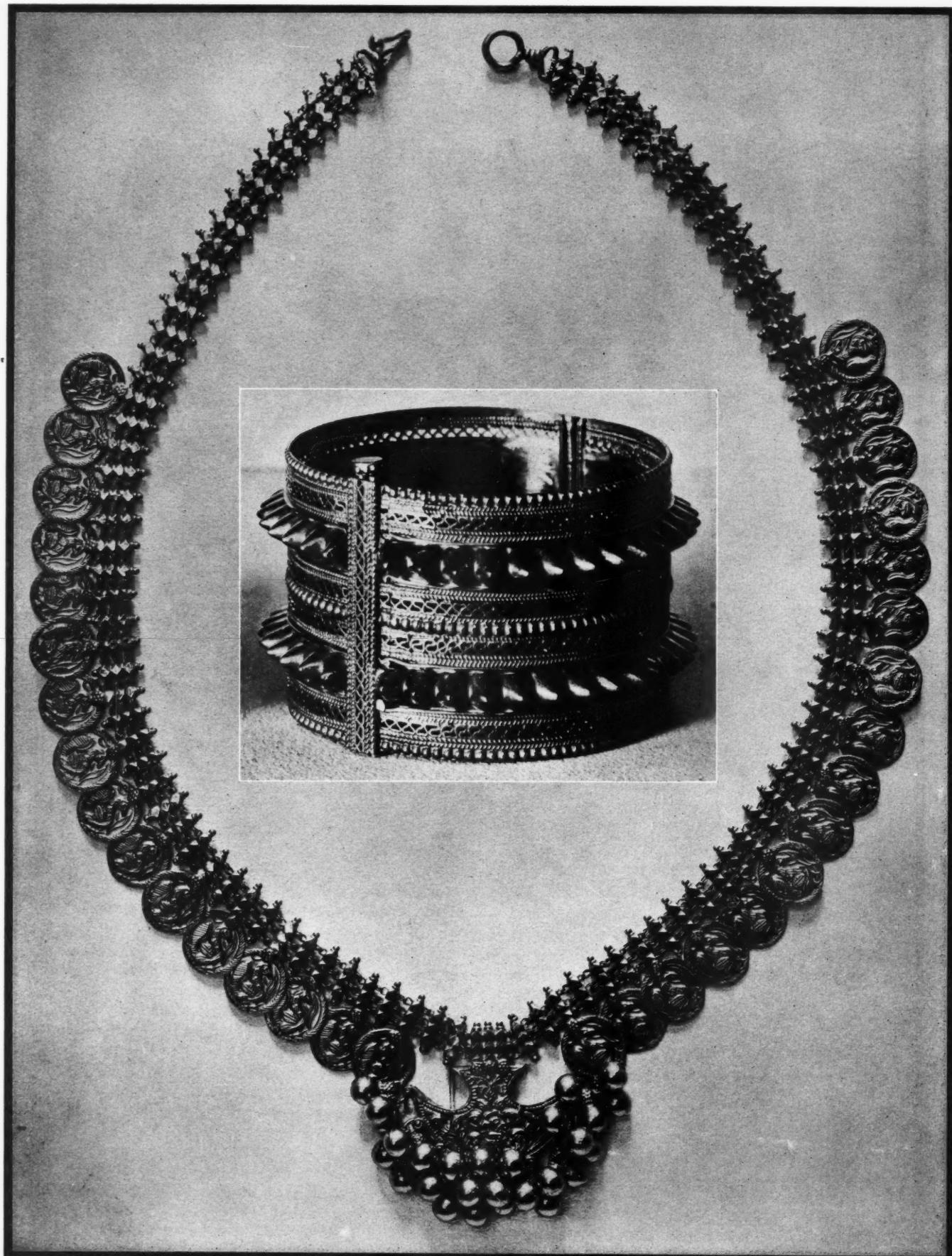
An excellent example of beautifully simple decorative drawings with a decided human element portrayed

colors used in the paintings, so far as have been discovered, were red, yellow, brown, blue, black and white. A very interesting example of their painted art is a group of ostriches and ostrich hunters. The skill with which the artist grouped the ostriches is quite remarkable, and shows no little knowledge of artistic arrangement. The ostriches seem to have detected the ruse of the hunters, who approached them in the disguise of other ostriches. If we were not told of the origin of this sketch, we would hardly have thought of crediting it to a member of the most lowly of existing tribes of men.

The Bushmen artists succeeded most admirably in painting battle scenes between the Bushmen and the negro. A band of men are seen in pursuit of some cattle thieves. A majority of Bushmen have turned back to repel the attack of their approaching enemy, while the remainder is occupied in urging on the cattle. Apparently the tall, athletic figures in pursuit are the Kaffirs, while the small figures in gray represent the Bushmen. In another illustration, a number of hunters are shown in rapid pursuit of the swiftly running antelopes. The artist has succeeded in reproducing the swift movements of the antelopes in a very realistic manner, and the animal reproduction is superior to that of the men.

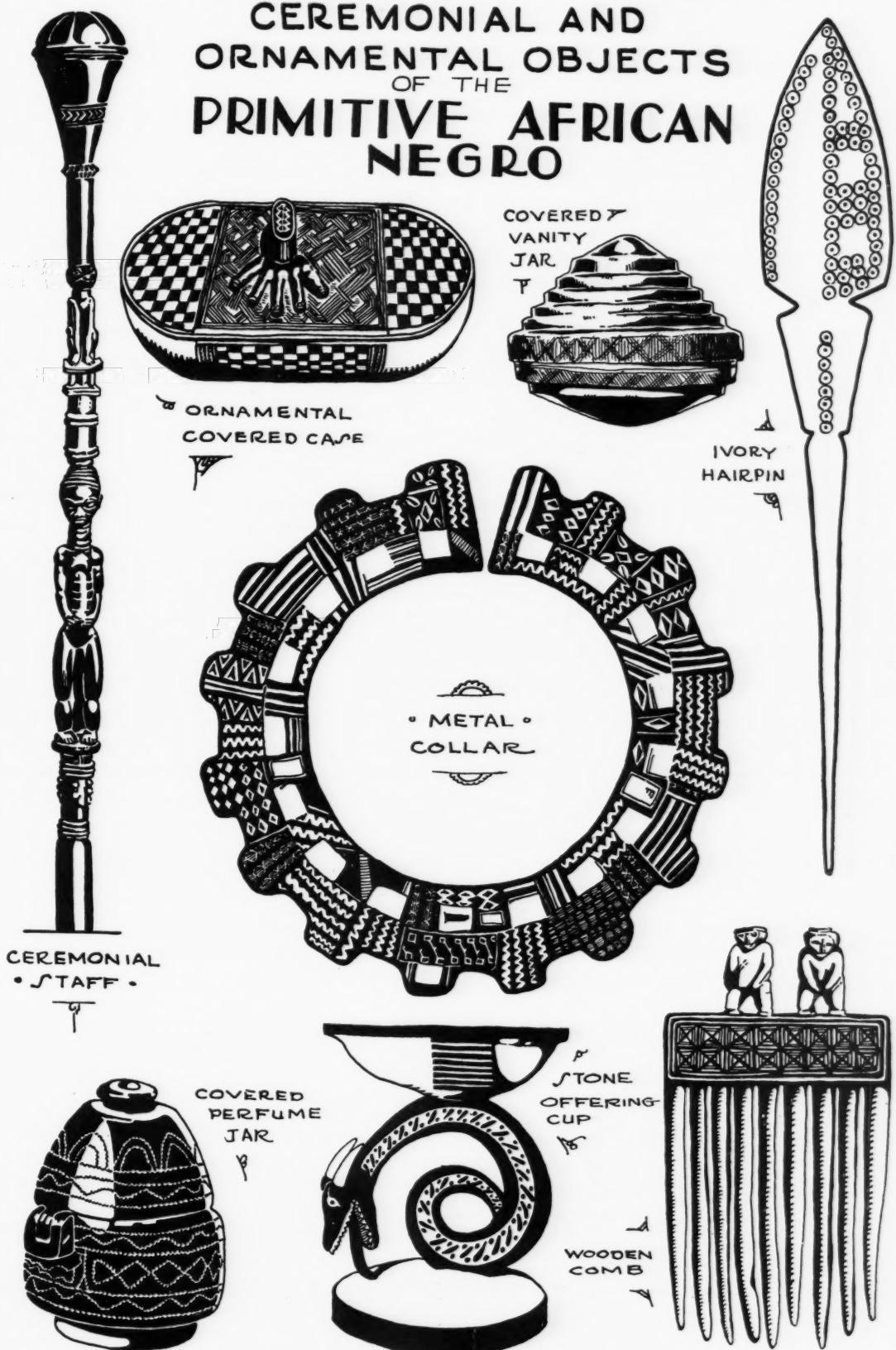


RESEARCH AND DRAWINGS
BY FLORENCE F. STROYNE



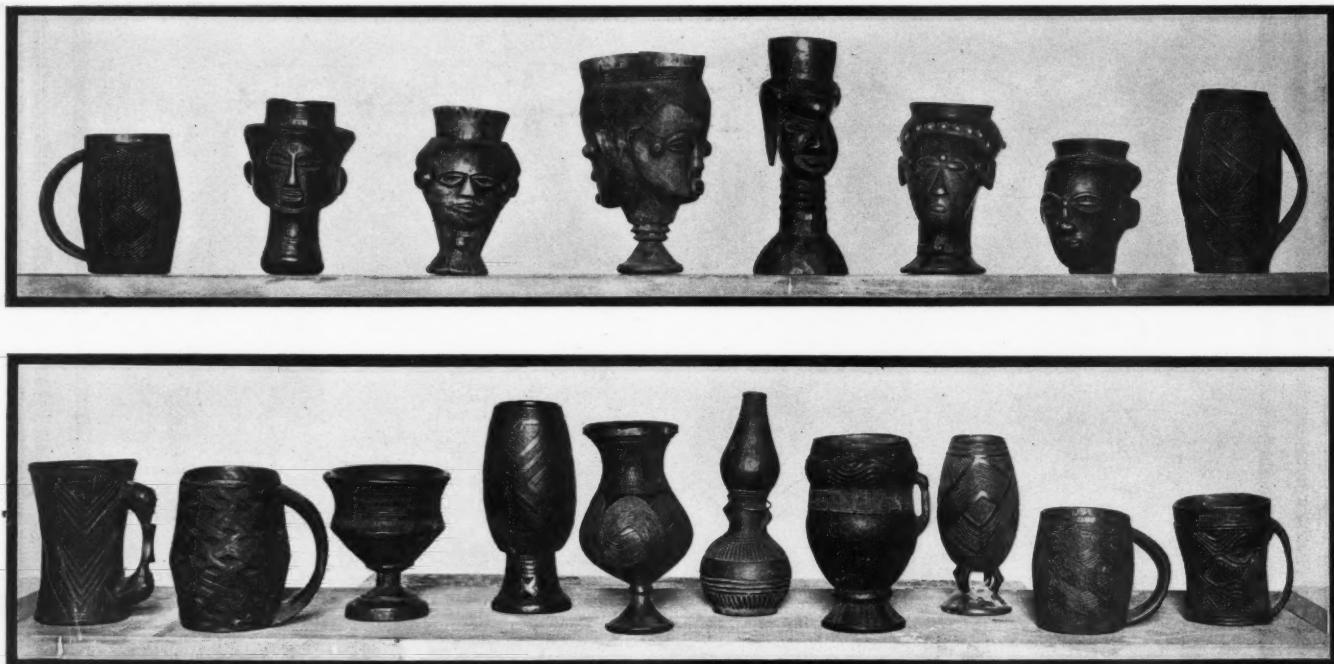
HAND WROUGHT GOLD NECKLACE
AND BRACELET FROM ZANZIBAR

CEREMONIAL AND ORNAMENTAL OBJECTS OF THE PRIMITIVE AFRICAN NEGRO



R. M. HUDSON

RESEARCH AND DRAWINGS
BY RALPH M. HUDSON



BROOKLYN MUSEUM

DECORATIVE UTENSILS OF PRIMITIVE AFRICANS

BY DOROTHY C. MILLER

■ Products of present-day African craftsmen which have any artistic value whatever are apparently scarcer every year. The withering effects of intruding civilization upon any native art is well known. It seems probable, however, that the decoration of objects of domestic utility, that is, what we call "applied art", is slower to suffer change through outside influences than the art of sculpture, which depended so completely upon the religious beliefs of the people. "Art for art's sake" did not exist in Africa. Negro languages have no word for art or artist. The work which we now designate as "art"—fetishes, masks—had its origin in religion, while even the ornamentation of objects of everyday household use often had religious significance. Many humble objects, however, have come out of Africa, having little or no inspiration in religious custom, which illustrate the Negro's unlimited desire to decorate everything he uses.

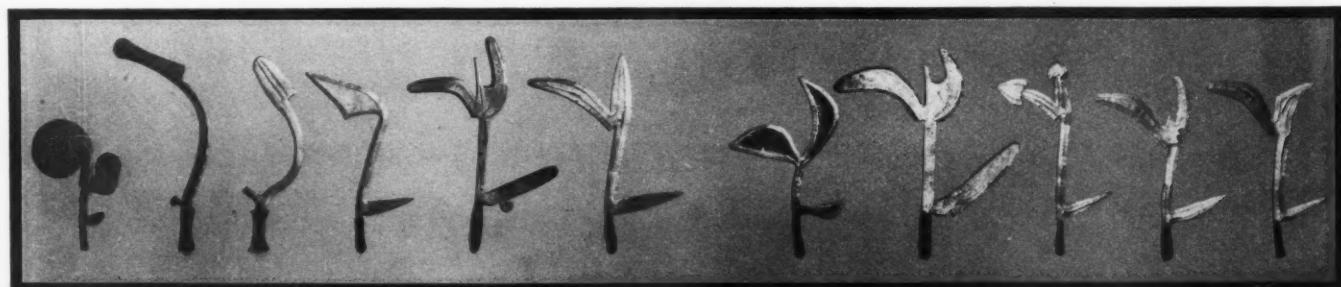
The African collection of the Newark Museum demonstrates excellently, in its weapons, its household utensils, its personal ornaments, its mats, the way in which the native craftsman can transform the lowliest utilitarian article into a work of art. It is from this part of the Museum's collection that most of the photographs here shown are taken. Modern artists have already learned their

Photographs taken from collection in the Newark Museum of Industrial Arts

Above—Goblets. Below—Throwing Knives from upper Belgian Congo

lesson from Africa, but those who design our cups and saucers, our scissors, spoons, pencils, hairbrushes, medicine bottles and the like, may still learn something about proportion and form, and simple use of the material at hand from this primitive work. One of the most solid virtues a craftsman can be gifted with is a feeling for his material, and this the African has. Wood is wood, iron is iron, ivory is ivory, and he knows how to get the best out of each.

Another virtue of the African craftsman which may easily be overlooked when we look at his products so far removed from their original setting, is his feeling for color. Fortunate travelers who have seen an Africa undestroyed by so-called civilization can vouch for the native's color sense. Given the dense green of forest, the rich brown of earth and of his own skin, he instinctively keeps to harmonious colors in everything he wears and uses. Polished ebony and mahogany, mellow ivory, sun-bleached grasses,





RESEARCH AND DRAWINGS
BY RALPH M. HUDSON



METAL CALABASH COVER FROM OLD CALABAR



CALABASH COVER FROM WEST AFRICA



HAND WROUGHT SILVER COMBS FROM ZANZIBAR

raffia dyed rust-red and brown, burnished copper, soft gourd-orange,—never a false note. In looking at African objects we may also remember that, like a child, primitive man is fascinated by movement. It is the fact that an object moves rather than the object itself which first attracts his attention, and it has been suggested that the origin of geometric design is to be sought in this love of spontaneous movement. Whether this is true or not, the geometric pattern with which the African decorates his household utensils are full of life and movement. The apparently static designs on basketry mats and bowls come to life as we stare at them—circles whirl, zigzag and diamond patterns dance and sparkle.

The African craftsman is very skillful at filling a given space without crowding it, as we may see in the carved calabashes which he uses for food bowls. When these fruit shells are carved, the natural dull orange color of the fruit contrasts pleasantly with the softer brown of incised parts. And as these bowls are used, their surface is mellowed and the color deepened by handling. The calabash shape is also copied in bowls of wood and metal, two examples of which are reproduced here. The beautiful copper calabash cover shows how well the African composes his pattern, subordinating detail to whole, and also how delicately he can work when the material allows. The wooden bowl, with its striking black design inspired by weapons, gains in vigor by its disregard for exact symmetry. In these three bowls, the natural calabash, the metal, and the wooden, we see the craftsman's unerring instinct for his material. The metal permits delicacy and jewel-like fineness in both design and execution; the heaviness and sponginess of the soft white wood demands bold contrast; while in the calabash, the delicate color and thinness of the shell are not suited to such strong contrasts, but its even soapy texture makes it possible to groove it with patterns extremely sharp and fine. All the natural qualities of these materials the African has perfectly felt and respected.

It is undoubtedly in wood carving that the African Negro has won his title of creative artist. But he has lavished his artistic skill on an imposing number of different materials besides,—ivory, iron, gold, silver, copper, bronze (*cire perdue* method learned from the Portuguese in the 16th century), leather, horn, and fibres. Among the ivories shown here is a sultan's cane, the handle carved with a head of great dignity and spiritual beauty. The sensitive modeling of this head is very inadequately shown in the photograph. Increasing beauty of surface of things by age and usage is characteristic of much of this primitive work. Wooden statues are polished and worn smooth by the touch of many hands. Ivory slowly darkening grows more beautiful every year. How well have African artists understood the real artistic value of ivory, modelling it in simple smoothly rounded masses, instead of cutting its surface into a maze of intricate figures and patterns as Ori-



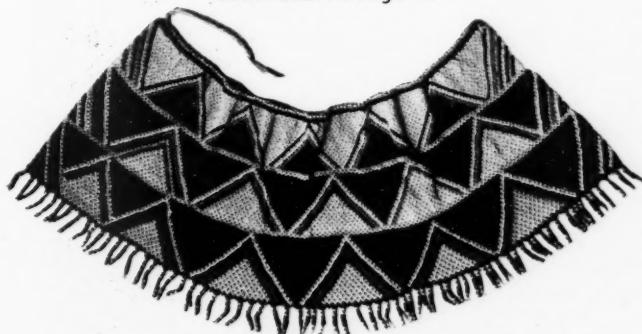
DESIGN

entals do. This Oriental work is spoiled instead of enriched by yellowing, and the ivory's greatest natural beauty, its incomparable surface texture, is lost in a mere exhibition of the carver's skill. The African artist, on the other hand, gives the material its full value, allowing for that inner golden beauty of ivory which age alone can bring out.

The most distinctive feature of the industrial life of Africans is the blacksmith's art. Iron has been worked from time immemorial by Negroid peoples. Modern ethnologists have even hailed the African as the inventor of the industry. Primitive Africa bears no traces of a true Stone or Bronze Age, the reason being that the continent is so rich in iron ores that the metal can be extracted with small trouble by the simplest methods. Some tribes attribute the discovery of iron to divine inspiration, and the art is everywhere much esteemed. The ore is smelted in a primitive clay furnace. The blacksmith has a charcoal fire heated by native bellows, and a stone anvil and hammer. Time is no object, and he spends days shaping a single weapon. The "shongo" or throwing knife, a row of which is reproduced here, was once the chief weapon of the Bushongo people of Belgian Congo, who by its terrible power cut their way from north to south Congo, subduing all tribes in their path. It is not hard to understand the fear inspired by these mysterious weapons. Imagine hundreds of them whirling through the air, all released at once at a cry from the leader. No wonder the enemies' resistance became panic when those flashing thunderbolts assailed them. Look at the grace and deadly beauty of the knives. Every line of them suggests speed-flight. They have a distinct personality, joyous as well as deadly, expressing the fierce delight of the warrior. The effect is gained simply by shape and lustre of the iron. They are as different as possible from ancient European weapons, for instance, resplendent with silver and precious stones. Jewels suggest luxury, softness. These hard primitive weapons are far more in keeping with the spirit of fighting than those "prettier" ones.

The African collection of the Newark Museum, gathered at intervals from various sources, is small but quite important. It is more fully illustrative of native manners and customs and simple everyday crafts than of African "art" in the more ambitious sense of the word. It includes a few good pieces of sculpture—masks and statuettes, as well as the rare Ogooué idol photographed here. It may be interesting to those not already acquainted with the collection to mention some of its outstanding features. Large and varied is the group of fine native-wrought weapons, from the heavy sculptured Kasai ceremonial ax, and the elephant spears down to the little ebony and ivory handled knives which women of the Congo wear in their hair as charms. They are products of the native blacksmith's art at its best.

Continued on Page 19



BEAD WORK FROM SOUTH AFRICA
SHOWING RHYTHMIC TRIANGLES



CEREMONIAL STAFFS WITH A RARE USE OF DECORATION

ANALYZING THE PRIMITIVE

BY HELEN RHODES

Designs made by the students in the University of Washington illustrating by means of simple analysis, how few simple primary masses form the basic structure of primitive design

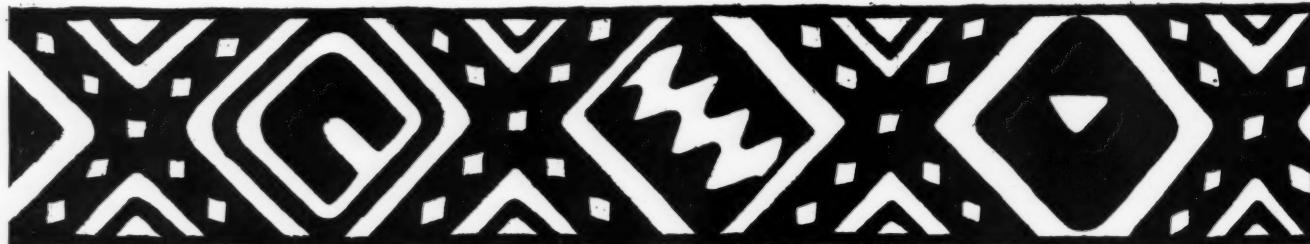
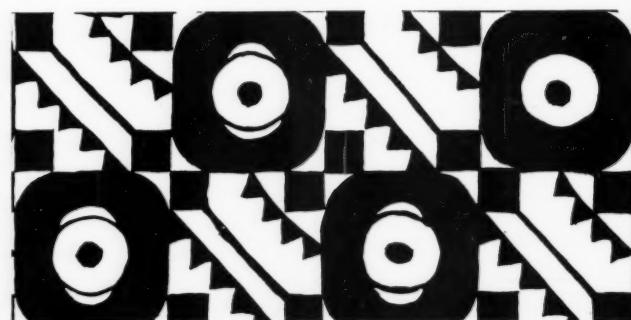
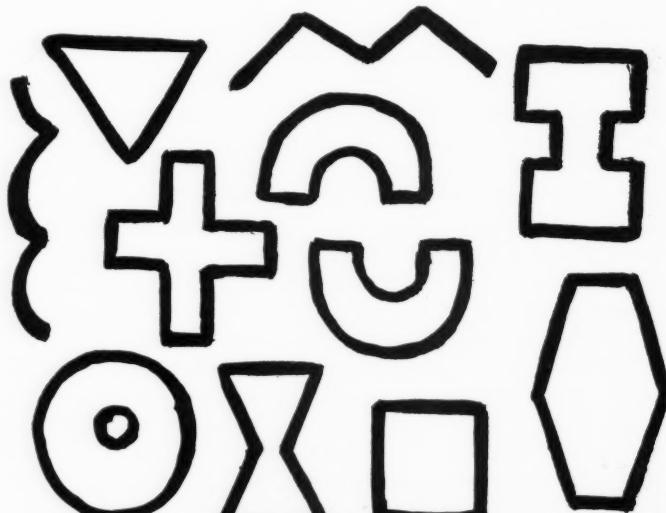
■ Someone recently asked why our Art Libraries were continually acquiring new books on Primitive Art. There surely must be some good reason, outside of their interest to the Archeologist and the Professor of Art History why such books and portfolios as "The Textiles of the Peruvians," "Coptic Fabrics," "The Crafts of the North American Indian," "The Tapa Cloth of Hawaii," "The Palm Cloth Patterns of the Bushongo," "The Negro Fetishes of the Ivory Coast," and "Primitive Negro Sculpture," to mention a few familiar names and coin a few others, may be seen today in all progressive Art Libraries. The study of the genesis of art form may belong primarily to the History of Art or to Archeology but there is another approach, that of aesthetic analysis and inspiration, where the art of the Primitive makes a valuable contribution to the equipment of the teacher of design or art structure in a College Art Department.

To realize the value of this contribution, one must know something of the many wrong art-ideas which most freshmen in college have acquired during their pre-college years, superficial ideals, to which the primitive art is diametrically opposed, and a good antidote. To specifically enumerate the reasons why the primitive is valuable for analysis and inspiration, we might say:

First: Because familiarity with and study of the best primitive, and very little except the best has been preserved, is the easiest and simplest way of acquiring an appreciation for the basic laws of design such as *rhythm*, *variety*, *subordination*, *opposition*, *unity*, for in most primitive works these are all present. These same principles may be present in a fifteenth century French Tapestry or in an El Greco painting, but they are not nearly so easy to analyze and analysis is after all very necessary even though we would all prefer to get our appreciation through aesthetic feeling. Regarding this point Guillaume and Munro in their interesting book on "Negro Sculpture" say, "Moreover, the real mystery of art and of all beauty only grows under inspection, why and how it is that certain forms, rhythms, musical chords, colors, can produce in us the profound and distinctive emotions they do." To study and analyze the pattern in an Indian basket or in a fine Tapa cloth will increase our enjoyment of it and will also make more possible the understanding of more complex and

subtle works of art. *Rhythm*, through the repetition of some of the border patterns, *subordination*, of the smaller masses at the bottom to the large dark mass at the top, *variety* through the different widths, and *opposition* in the strong opposing line. Could there be a more concise A B C lesson in Art Structure? And an Ivory Coast or Gaban *trood Fetish* may be just as systematically analyzed.

Second: Because the impulse of joy and play and spontaneity is close to the aesthetic impulse in the primitive, and it is a similar feeling, that of pleasure in the combination and recombination of significant lines and masses and color which the design teacher would encourage in her pupil, whether child or adult. Probably no mature artist works without some joy and exhilaration and no child scribbling away with a piece of colored chalk is without the spirit of another kind of playful creation, but in the not far distant past, and especially in our public schools, much teaching of art was connected with drill and drudgery. One of the encouraging signs of art teaching in the public schools today is the trend toward spontaneous creation and there is



no doubt but that the study of Primitive Indian and Negro Art has had something to do in stimulating this.

Third: The design of the primitive artist is always *strong, virile*, rarely weak or decadent. Useless lines and a superficial quality are never found in it. Many primitive textile designs are founded on simple geometric forms in original and strong combinations. It is this feeling for *strength, simplification* and *abstraction* or *generalization*, with a desire for originality and self-expression, which the art teacher knows will obliterate the false ideals of beauty which the students have acquired. At least it will encourage a dislike for the merely pretty or superficial.

One of the problems which has been used at the University of Washington for several years and which does not seem to lose its vitality is that of the all-over-pattern made with Bushongo textile pattern or the Hawaiian Tapa cloth as an inspiration. The number of variations produced in simple geometric themes even in one class of students working on this problem is remarkable. An introductory talk is given by the instructor to begin this problem, and a few simple geometric figures are put on the blackboard (Plate B) to show the source of much early textile pattern. Pos-

sibly the Bushongo artist may have originally, had in mind a human figure or an animal, but these finally were simplified into squares and triangles and other forms. The pupils are encouraged to invent many more straight and curved line forms. They are asked to take India ink or black show-card color thinned with water and a large-sized Japanese brush, with some type of heavy bogus paper and to experiment, first, with gobs and masses of black, varied with some lights. Caution is necessary that in this particular they emulate their primitive ancestor and make the spot grow from within outward and not, as is the habit of the pencil-educated adult, making a careful ink outline and filling this in. The first method gives infinitely more freedom. They must also think about contour of both lights and darks. After two or three days spent in experimenting with these two-value motifs, the students are encouraged to put two or more motifs together, discovering, as they will, that in doing this, new combinations of lights and darks appear which will need some effort to adjust. The earliest principle they have learned, that of *variety*, must be applied in each step, for an equal amount of dark and light in areas will of course be monotonous. Rearrangement of the motifs and the making of new ones to fill in some spaces will naturally follow and at this time, when the structure of the pattern is being worked out, the instructor may give a talk on pattern anatomy, of which the book of Lewis F. Day is a fine exposition, and the students will find that their motifs usually fall into one of the several forms which Mr. Day mentions for repeat. The divisions of their final paper, a coarse heavy *brown* bogus type, not unlike primitive bark cloth, are made according to the forms in which their patterns fall and the design is *traced* freely, making a black and brown *all-over pattern*, with sometimes the addition of one color. Care is necessary in this final copy not to lose the good spacing which they have acquired in their first freely designed motifs.

The accompanying illustrations show some of the designs made several years ago in the Art Structure classes at the University of Washington, and others done quite recently.

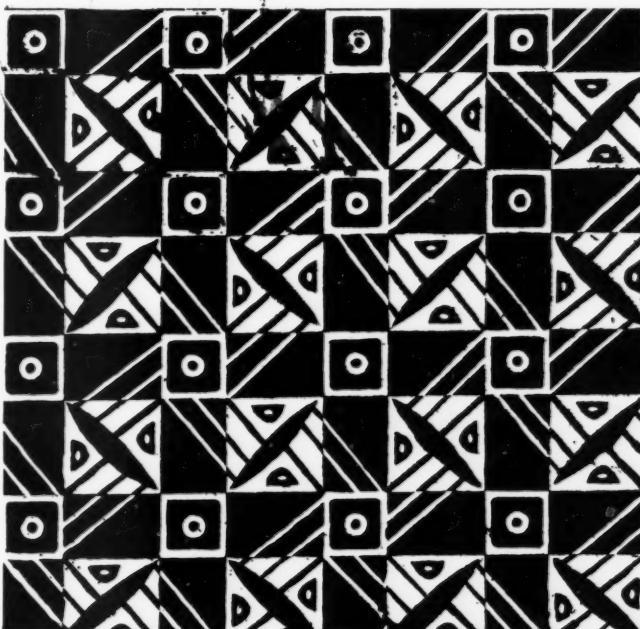
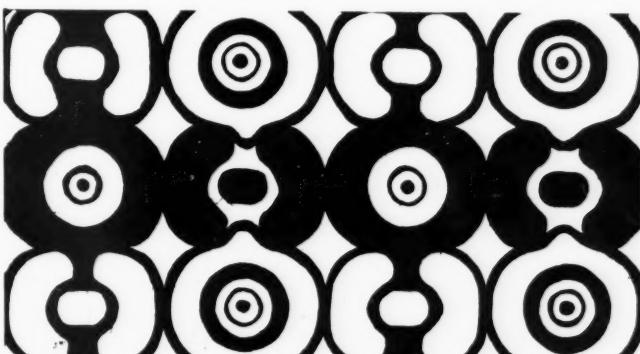
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DECORATIVE UTENSILS of PRIMITIVE AFRICANS ::

Continued from Page 17

Musical instruments also form an important part of the collection, among them a unique piece, so far as is known, a huge four-clappered wooden bell. A group of rare little snuff bottles in wood, ivory and silver are an entertaining addition, and are valuable from the point of view of design. Costume accessories, hats, bustles and bark cloth aprons from the Upper Belgian Congo, jewelry of ivory, elephant hair, brass and copper, and even iron, the great brass rings weighing twenty to fifty pounds that are worn as necklets, all add a personal touch.

Designs constructed by pupils of Miss Rhodes from the few primary shapes used by the primitive African Negro patterns



■ A statue in black bronze by Allan Clark of Jacques Cartier, the young American dance artist who has embodied in his *voodoo dance* a fine understanding of the simple, direct rhythms of the Primitive Africans. By stripping the dance of all the cloying over-detailed ornamentation and reverting to the forceful moments of these childish though vital people, he has given a new meaning, a significant decorative quality to the art of the male dancer. He has done through his appreciation of fine line quality, form and movement for the dance what some of the great modern designers, painters and sculptors have done for the decorative arts, and which is so remarkably felt in the piece of sculpture reproduced on this page.

The beauty of African Negro rhythm expressed in the dance by Jacques Cartier, and again in sculpture by Allan Clark



GRAND CENTRAL ART GALLERIES

THE CONGO VOO DOO DANCER



Extraordinary refinement of line and rhythm is demonstrated in the tablet above with its almost Egyptian feeling this bronze relief from the Ancient City of Benin in West Africa, and in the three alluring Horn birds from the Island of Madagascar

FIGURES USED IN RHYTHMIC DECORATIONS

THE JUDGMENT DAY

BY AARON DOUGLAS

An illustration for the poem by that name showing how this modern Negro Artist has achieved a style as simple, decorative and dynamic as the rhythm of Primitive African Sculpture which has been his inspiration and constant ideal

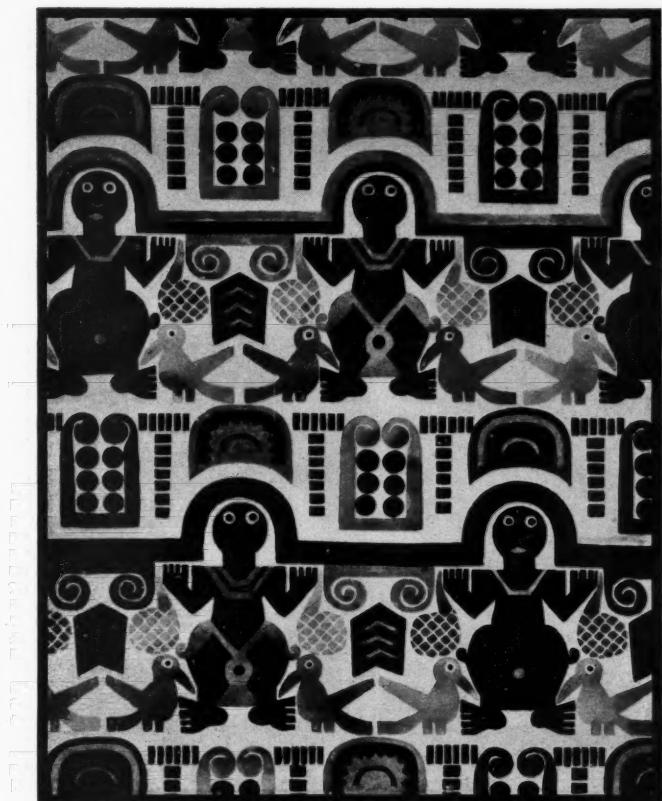


VIKING PRESS



AN AGOUÉ IDOL FROM NEW CALABAR

■ The distinctive work of Aaron Douglas, American negro artist, proves the significance of Primitive African Art to a profound student of design, while this subject is negro life, his technique modern European, his appreciation and understanding of such a piece of sculpture as the Agoué idol reproduced on this page has led him to put into his illustrations such rare quality. Rhythm to him is the dominating force in negro life, and it is this principle which compels him to subordinate such important factors as humor and pathos for immediately beyond these are the ever recurring pulsing rhythms of the race. To express this he has seen fit to do violence to perspective with all its alluring temptations, to go through dimensional qualities. Furthermore he ignores the physical appeal and apparent realities of the human figure, but instead selects discriminating, decorative two dimensional masses subtle in their contour and through these builds up a pattern in which the human figure is frequently subordinated to other masses. But ever present is the constant repetition of these beautifully rhythmic shapes with a musical beating movement from light to dark values.



A . . . TEXTILE DESIGN

BY LEON BAKST

Showing how this great Russian designer and colorist has taken for his inspiration African Negro Sculpture and Abstract Motifs from which he has created this startling design. In this very direct all-over pattern there is a repeat quite African in its simple dignity

■ From just such material as this fetish on the right from the Belgian Congo an artist designer with imagination can see much material for his work. It was from sculpture of this sort that Leon Bakst got his inspiration for his forceful creations which have startled the artistic groups in all the great centers of the world. Strong, simple masses easily understood arrangements resulting in an elemental sort of rhythm is the dominant characteristic of much of his decorative design. And added to this his fearless use of strong colors has made him the leader of the modern movement, particularly in the field of the stage, costumer and textile design. Students and teachers can find no more valuable sources of rich material from which to work than the many phases of African sculpture, pottery, textiles, metal and wood carvings. Note in the illustrations on this page the very geometric shapes used and the few directions of lines. Pleasing arrangement of dark medium and light masses in the textile above are factors which make it a forceful design and an excellent example which student designers could well afford to give thorough study.





CARVED AND PAINTED DEATH
MASKS FROM WEST AFRICA